INTEROPERABILITY

Deep Sneakers: The Importance of Public Standards

Dave Oran is one of the world's top network architects. One of Digital Equipment Corp.'s network experts and the author of DEC's Distributed Naming Services, Oran is an active participant in both the International Organization for Standardization and American National Standards Institute standards processes.

He tells the story of how he objected to a recent proposal on policy-based routing. "If we go ahead with this," he declaimed at one point, "we'll really be in deep sneakers."

Oops. All the foreign delegates whipped out their dictionaries. Deep? Hmmm. Sneakers? Hmmm. Deep sneakers? Many delegates continued their probes into the meaning of this phrase for the rest of the meeting.

Dave learned his lesson. Idioms should be kept to a minimum for effective communications among different cultures.

Many vendors should learn that same lesson. Systems Network Architecture, DECnet and NetWare are our moral equivalents to the Southern Drawl, the Boston Honk and the Western Twang. I have trouble understanding all three.

Standards let us communicate in non-idiomatic fashion. Private standards efforts, like the Open Software Foundation, are the equivalent of helping New Jerseyites and New Yorkers understand each other. International public standards, however, are a way for the world to communicate.

The international standards-making bodies—the International Telecommunication Union and the ISO—play a vital public role. Private bodies, like the OSF, or informal bodies, like the Internet Engineering Task Force, are effective in getting standards made, but groups like ISO are needed for international acceptance.

Standards-making has become the province of, in the words of internetwork standards guru Marshall Rose, "goers instead of doers." He refers to those whose sole role is to be professional standards-makers. People who really use standards—the engineers who make products and the systems managers who implement networks—should also make the standards.

The process at ISO needs a shot in the arm. It is incredibly expensive to participate. You must be prepared to fly around the world and attend lots of meetings in exotic locations.

The barriers to participation mean that good standards are often the exception. Even the X.400 Message Handling System standard was fatally flawed coming out of the initial standards efforts. Only after implementors tried to work with the specification did many key concepts get worked back into the actual standard.

A better model is to use the very networks that ISO is trying to standardize. ISO has just put itself on the Internet via a link to the University of Geneva. This is an important start. The ITU has yet to take this step.

Network-based mailing lists and discussion groups, distribution of working documents, and publication of standards on archive servers are just a few of the vital steps that should be taken to get wide participation in their efforts. ISO and the ITU should use the networks for which they make standards.

CARL MALAMUD, THE AUTHOR OF SIX BOOKS, JUST PUBLISHED 'STACKS,' WHICH WAS FEATURED AS THE INTEROP BOOK AT THIS YEAR'S INTEROP CONFERENCE. THE VIEWS EXPRESSED ARE HIS OWN.

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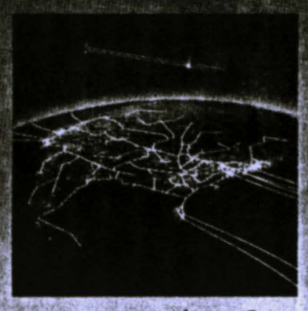

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